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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the question of whether maternal employment during childhood predisposed a child to depression. One hundred and eight college students completed self-report measures of depression and retrospecive accounts of maternal absence due to employment. Forty-five of the subjects had mothers who had worked before they were 12 years of age, and the remaining 63 had nonworking mothers. It was predicted that subjects' self-reported lack of maternal inclusion would be related to depression. Additionally, it was expected that there would be an interaction between mothers' working or not working and subjects' self-reported feelings of maternal exclusion. Results supported recent evidence that the quality of mother/child interaction, rather than the amount of maternal absence, was related to subsequent depressive symptomatology. Lack of maternal inclusion was significantly related to instrumental helplessness, poor self-esteem, sad mood, low energy, and guilt. The relationship between maternal employment and depression was nonsignificant. (Author/MP)

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Does Maternal Employment Predispose a Child to Depression?

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Abstract

The current study investigated the question of whether maternal employment during childhood predisposed a child to depression. Students completed self-report measures of depression and retrospective accounts of maternal absence due to employment. Schultz's LIPHE was used to assess maternal affective inclusion during childhood. Results supported recent evidence that the quality of mother-child interaction, rather than the quantity of maternal absence was related to subsequent depressive symptomatology. Lack of maternal inclusion was significantly related to the following symptoms: instrumental helplessness, self-esteem, sad mood, low energy, and guilt. The relationship between maternal employment and depression was non-significant.

INTRODUCTION

With an increasing number of mothers in the work force, the claims and counterclaims about the effects of maternal employment on children have taken on greater and greater importance. Bowlby (1958, 1969) and others (e.g. Hess, 1970; Yarrow, 1964), on the one hand, have advocated the importance of a strong mother-child attachment, and a one to one relationship in the early years, and have suggested that maternal absence can lead to severe psychopathology. In particular, Bowlby (1953) has emphasized the similarities in symptomatology between adult depression and the behavior of children who have experienced maternal absence or death.

However, recent research suggests that maternal employment and mother-child attachment need not be mutually exclusive. Schubert et al. (1980) observed communication patterns of working and non-working mothers and their infants, and concluded that the monther-child interaction is not affected by employment. In addition, other studies (e.g. Fleener, 1973; Farran & Ramey, 1977; Ricciutti, 1974), suggest that infants may become attached to a regular sitter or a caregiver in a daycare center, but the preference is nevertheless for the mother figure. These studies support the earlier findings of Ainsworth (1963) who reported that children with mulitple caretakers formed as strong a maternal attachment as children reared exclusively by the mother. More recently, several authors (e.g. Emerson, 1964;

Woods, 1972; Bronfenbrenner, 1973; Etaugh, 1974; Ainsworth, 1979; Hoffman, 1979) have found that it was the mother's responsiveness and the quality of the mother-child interactions that were instrumental to the child's personal and social adjustment.

Consequently, the current study looks at not only depression and depressive symptomatology, but specifically at whether or not the child felt included by the mother (Schultz, 1978). The study asks if young adults whose mothers worked when they were children differ from those whose mothers were at home. It was predicted that self-reported lack of maternal inclusion would be related to depression. However, because the literature is inconclusive, no specific predictions were made about the relationship between depression and maternal employment. Additionally, it was expected that there would be an interaction between whether or not the mother worked and self-reported feelings of maternal exclusion, that is, when the mother worked and the child felt excluded there would be more depression. Furthermore, in addition to severity of depression, the current study examined mood reactivity and several separate depressive symptoms to investigate whether depression, if relevant at all, manifested in a characteristic manner.

METHOD

Subjects included 108 students from the introductory psychology class subject pool at a midwestern university. Forty-five of the subjects had a mother who had worked before the child was twelve years of age. The remaining sixty-three subjects had non-working mothers.

All subjects completed a packet of questionnaires. Subjects were instructed to complete the inventories at home and return them at the next class time. Instructions for completing the questionnaires were included in the packets.

The materials consisted of the Zung (1965) Self-Rating Depression Scale (SDS) which provided a measure of severity of depression, the Berndt (1981) short form of the Multiscore Depression Inventory (MDI), a self-report measure of depressive mood, designed to be sensitive to mood variations typical of a normal population. The MDI also provides subscale scores for the following depressive symptoms: guilt, social introversion, instrumental helplessness, low self-esteem, energy level, cognitive difficulty, pessimism, sad mood, and irritability. The degree of mood fluctuation was provided by the Underwood and Froming (1980) measure of mood reactivity. Lastly, Schultz's (1978) Life Interpersonal History Enquiry (LIPHE), and a questionnaire

asking about maternal availability in childhood, specifically if and when the mother or surrogate mother worked, was included in the packet. The LIPHE provided a retrospective account of feelings of maternal inclusion, and a median split divided the group into high and low exclusion. Subjects were also classified as to whether or not the mother or mother-surrogate worked before the child reached the age of twelve.

RESULTS

A 2 x 2 analysis of variance was performed on the data with the three measures of depression and nine depressive symptoms as dependent variables. The independent variables were high and low exlusion and mother working or not working.

There was no significant difference in depression or depressive moods either for the main effect of maternal employment or for the interaction between work and inclusion. On the other hand, the main effect for inclusion indicated that greater exclusion was associated with more depression on the MDI ($p < .01$) and the SDS and mood reacitivity measures (both $p < .05$). On the symptoms of depression measured by the subscales of the MDI, main effects for greater exclusion were related to instrumental helplessness ($p < .001$) and low self-esteem, sad mood, low energy, and guilt (all $p < .05$). Non-significant relationships were obtained for the remaining symptoms (cognitive difficulty, irritability, pessimism, and social introversion).

In addition, when asked who their primary caretaker was, twenty-nine of the forty-five subjects with working mothers reported that either one or both of their parents were their primary caretakers during their first twelve years of life. Of the remaining sixteen, fourteen subjects rated both parents and babysitter or other relative as primary caretakers. Only two subjects rated either babysitter or relative as sole caretaker.

DISCUSSION

Results indicate that whether or not a mother works is apparently unrelated to her child's subsequent depression, mood reactivity, or mood symptomatology. However, retrospective accounts of dissatisfaction with maternal attention (exclusion on the LIPHE) was apparently related to level of depression, mood reactivity, and a depressive symptom pattern including instrumental helplessness, low self-esteem, guilt, sad mood, and fatigue. A high level of significance between instrumental helplessness and feelings of exclusion is not surprising. According to Berndt et al. (1980), a person assumes an instrumentally helpless role when he/she perceives a deficit in social reinforcements. It follows that a person who feels excluded from maternal affection would have a greater than normal sensitivity to that type of social reinforcement.

The findings also indicate that children of a working mother

still acknowledge her as their primary caretaker although she may not be the person with whom they spend the majority of their day. The results appear to provide self-report validation of the importance of the perceived quality of the mother-child interaction, and hence complement the findings of several authors (e.g., Ainsworth, 1963, 1979; Schaffer & Emerson, 1964; Woods, 1972; Bronfenbrenner, 1973; Etaugh, 1974; Hoffman, 1979).

However, several methodological problems must be acknowledged. First, retrospective accounts of maternal inclusion are subject to distortion. Beck (1967) theorizes that depression is characterized by a distortion in one's perception. If so, it might be possible that the depressed individual has a distorted view of the past and therefore recalls feelings of maternal exclusion. On the other hand, Schultz (1978) in discussing the pros and cons of retrospective data, argues that the passage of time may provide for unknown, significant elements to surface.

Secondly, the subjects were drawn from a population of 18-20 year olds. Most likely, the mothers of these children worked out of financial necessity. The child's perception of maternal employment would be different for these children than it would be for a child whose mother works today. That is, today, many women work for self-fulfillment as well as for financial reasons. In this situation the child may be more likely to experience the absence as rejection. On the other hand, if the mother is more satisfied working than not working, she may be more effective as a parent

(Hoffman, 1979). In this incidence the child may be happier and better adjusted. Perhaps further research is needed to assess the differences, if any, between retrospective accounts of college students and the phenomenology of children in today's culture.

In conclusion, results provide tentative evidence that working mothers' absence may not predispose a child to depression; rather the degree to which the child feels included and accepted by the mother appears to be the important factor. It is not the quantity of absence but the quality of time spent together that is important.

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